

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release On Receipt (prepared 6/12/75)

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APPLE SNAIL MAY BE KEY TO ENDANGERED EVERGLADE KITE'S SURVIVAL

The Florida Everglade kite's chances for survival in Florida have been enhanced by the establishment of a cooperative Federal-State team of experts who will give priority to restoring this hawk to its former healthy state.

Heading up the Everglade kite recovery team is Lovett Williams of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. Other team members are: Alexander Sprunt IV, Research Director of the National Audubon Society and Paul Sykes of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The team's primary objective is to coordinate actions to restore the Everglade kite to as much of its former range as possible, after drawing up a detailed plan which will schedule specific actions needed.

The Everglade kite (Rostrhamus sociabilis plumbeas) is a predatory bird, similar to a marsh hawk, and related to the falcon. It is one of several kinds of snail kites that occur in Central and South America. At one time the Florida Everglade or snail kite was distributed throughout peninsular Florida in fresh-water marshes. At present it is restricted primarily to southeastern Florida and is thought to number less than 100 individuals.

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The original population was severely reduced because of destruction of habitat and shooting. Drainage of marshes for agricultural and residential use continues to be a major factor in the decline of this bird. This problem, plus drought and fire, have reduced populations of the large apple snail (Pomacea paludosa) on which the kite depends for food. The major threat to the remaining kite population involves maintenance of proper water levels in its habitat for snail production and maintenance of nesting cover. In recent years the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades has been reduced by drought and diversion to agricultural areas.

Some constructive steps have been taken to assist the kite. Educational programs by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Audubon Society are intended to discourage indiscriminate shooting and publicize the plight of the kite. Numerous signs depicting this bird dot the marshes of southern Florida. Sanctuaries and known nesting areas are regularly patrolled. Portions of the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge where kites nest are closed to entry during nesting seasons.

Research also is underway in the field and at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center to ascertain the status of the kite, to determine conservation methods, and to develop techniques for increasing production of apple snails. South American snail kites, one of four subspecies of Everglade kite, are being reared at Patuxent to develop information on snail kite habitat requirements.